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SUBJECT: Embassy Niamey Confronts Gender-Based Violence in Niger

REF: STATE 104830

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1. SUMMARY: Between November 26 - December 10, 2008, Embassy Niamey took advantage of the U.N.-sponsored "16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence" (reftel) to raise awareness successfully on issues of domestic violence and women's rights in Niger. Niamey's Public Affairs Section (PAS) sponsored a series of activities that addressed problems associated and potential solutions to gender-based violence issues from various perspectives, including: legal, societal, religious, and human rights. The events were highly successful, were well-attended by key audiences, and received uniformly positive media coverage. END SUMMARY.

2. On November 26, 2008, Embassy Niamey sponsored an International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women speaker presentation at the American Cultural Center (ACC), featuring Ms. Moussa Satou of the Nigerien Association of Female Jurists (AFJN) and Ms. Mariama Moussa of women's rights NGO Women and Children Victims of Domestic Violence (FEEVVF). Ambassador Allen delivered opening remarks, which reinforced U.S. and international concern related to issues of gender-based violence, and reaffirmed the Mission's commitment to support local entities in addressing it. Ms. Satou's presentation dealt with issues related to domestic violence, in particular, violence against women, within Niger's legal framework. Ms. Moussa spoke about the civil society response to issues related to spousal and child abuse in Niger. Despite competing events offered by other local and international organizations on this same theme, the ACC event was well attended with over 40 participants, including the Secretary General of the Ministry of the Promotion of Women and Protection of Children, parliamentarians, jurists, and representatives of all major Nigerien women's organizations. The question and answer session that followed the formal presentation was so substantive and animated that Ambassador Allen extended the event for an additional 30 minutes past its planned conclusion. The presentation received considerable and positive media coverage, with extensive reporting by public and private TV, radio, and print press.

3. On December 4, 2008, PAS Niamey hosted a second event at the ACC, which addressed issues of gender-based violence and women's rights from a religious perspective. Respected Muslim cleric and International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) alumnus Cheikh Harouna Fodi's presentation dealt with the protection of women and women's rights within the context of the Islamic faith. Cheikh Fodi gave a detailed account of the importance that Islam bestows upon women and their contribution to society. He cited several Koranic verses stating that men and women are complementary, are to be afforded the same rights and considerations, and that only their efforts should distinguish them in terms of merit. Islam grants women specific protections and support for their material needs. The speaker lamented that negative attitudes of some Muslims towards women contribute to misperceptions about Islam, which in reality extends rights and protections to all, including to non-Muslims.

¶4. In the lively debate that followed, representatives of various women's associations provided examples of continuing instances of violence against women and children, and urged Niger's religious leadership to work to raise awareness among the general population and to improve respect for women's rights in accordance with Islamic tenets. This program also exceeded its allotted time to allow for expanded audience participation. Guests included Ambassador Allen, who again gave the opening address, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Islamic association leaders, and representatives of women's rights groups and NGOs. Media reports were copious and laudatory, with substantive pieces on public and private TV, radio, and several major newspapers.

¶5. On December 10, 2008, Embassy Niamey concluded its "16 Days of Activism" by co-sponsoring an International Human Rights Day program with the Nigerian National Association for the Defense of Human Rights (ANDDH) under the title, "Challenges of the Independence of the Magistrature in Niger." This event marked the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and included presentations by the dean of investigating judges Saadou Aladaoua, who talked about the limits (financial and institutional) and obstacles hindering the independence of the judicial system. He stated that prompt and consistent enforcement of justice is a major problem faced by the judiciary, although progress is being made recently in prosecuting dormant high-profile cases, which has involved the imprisonment of some, and dismissal of charges against others. A question and answer period followed the presentation, which drew strong attendance, particularly from representatives of non-governmental organizations concerned with human rights.

¶6. Note: Embassy Niamey does not have DVC capability, hence post was unable to implement the DVC program suggested in para 5 of reftel.

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¶7. Context of Gender-Based Violence in Niger: per reftel request, post offers the following information:

-- Specific activities undertaken by posts to celebrate the 2008 International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women - detailed above;

-- Specific activities undertaken by posts during the 2008 UN 16 Days of Activism Campaign against Gender-based Violence - detailed above;

-- Any notable legislation recently passed in the host country on the topic of gender-based violence - none;

-- Description of gender-based violence (and its different forms) most prevalent in host country - the following section from the 2007 Human Rights Report for Niger is offered as depicting the situation accurately:

"Domestic violence against women was widespread, although reliable statistics were not available. Husbands commonly beat their wives. The law does not explicitly prohibit domestic violence; however, a woman can sue her husband or lodge criminal charges for battery, penalties for which ranged from two months in prison and a 10,000 CFA (\$20) fine to 30 years' imprisonment. The government tried with limited success to enforce these laws. No data were available on how many abusers were prosecuted or convicted during the year. Charges stemming from family disputes were often dropped in favor of traditional dispute resolution mechanisms. While women have the right to seek redress for violence in the customary or modern courts, few did so due to ignorance of the legal system and fear of repudiation or social stigma. According to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), 429 cases of violence against women were reported from October 2006 through September 2007. Battery represented 44.9 percent of the cases, indecent assault 17.6 percent, and rape or attempted rape 16.4 percent."; and

-- Description of public awareness campaigns or other novel efforts that have made an impact on this issue - detailed above.

